

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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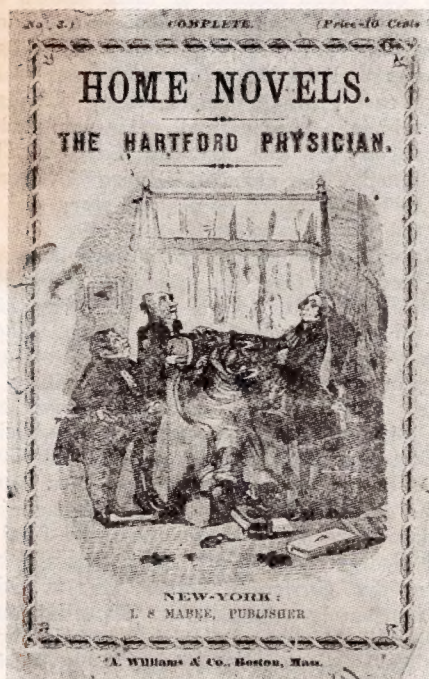
Whole No. 502

## Who Was George H. Coomer?

By S. E. Wallen

### PART I

George H. Coomer the Poet



### DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 174

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Publisher: Johnson & Mabee, 121 Nassau St., New York (first 2 issues), L. S. Mabee, 121 Nassau St., New York (from No. 3 up). Issues: 5 (highest number seen advertised). Dates: April 1866 to July 1866. Schedule of issue: Monthly. Size: 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ x4 $\frac{5}{8}$ ". Pages: 72. Price: 10c. Illustration: Black ink drawing on salmon colored cover. Contents: No. 1, The Stepmother, by A. Stewart Harrison. 2, Mrs. Billberry's Portfolio. 3, The Hartford Physician, Anonymous. 4, Seth, the Guide, by Willie F. Gilcrest. 5, The Ranchero. A Story of the Mexican War, by Willie F. Gilcrest.

## Who Was George H. Coomer?

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### PART I

#### George H. Coomer the Poet

There are many "blind spots" in this record. Your assistance in "closing the gaps" is not only invited but encouraged.

Readers of DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP are not necessarily poetry buffs so the explanation that this first installment is largely a report upon only one, but presumably a major, phase of Coomer's writing output is given early. It could be that George H. Coomer would like to be remembered as a poet. It is quite clear that he worked very hard at being a good one.

Complete files of many publications no longer exist, nor are they always available in any one convenient place. Even when all factors are favorable, careful research and patient rechecking requires more time than one is often able to spare. So it cannot be claimed that all the probable published sources of the subject author have been located, or those known to exist have been sufficiently and painstakingly examined. The probabilities are that many sources are still to be discovered and even those known have not been carefully researched to extract all of the information expressed and implied.

While looking for early juvenile books among a hodge-podge of dusty, dirty, beaten-up discards in a second-hand, catch-penny shop operated by a little mission group, a copy of "The Mountain Cave, or The Mystery of the Sierra Nevada" was found. The name of George H. Coomer was unknown; soon his name began to be recognized as a short story and serial story writer in *Golden Days* and the "hunt" was on!

The catalog cards of the books known to have been written by Coomer and owned by The Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Library of the University of Pennsylvania and The Free Library of Philadelphia gave no dates for the author's birth or death. The Free Library of Philadelphia only has a hard-back book or two of first, or early editions in their special collection of older American juveniles. These volumes are probably undated, as is so often the case, although present memory is a little vague as to whether this fact has been especially established.

The Library of Congress catalogs six book titles by George Coomer, only two of which appear to be hard-back editions, the other four would seem from the catalog cards to be paper-back reprints. The plausibility of this speculation will be examined in more detail in the third and final installment which will be concerned with George H. Coomer's serial tales and book-length stories.

We have assurance that George H. Coomer was published by the *Boston Cultivator*; in his only privately printed book, "Miscellaneous Poems"; in *Golden Days*, *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*; *Golden Argosy*; *The Youth's Companion*; *Good News*; *The Boys' Holiday*; *Army and Navy Weekly*; and one short story has been found in Harper and Brothers Publishers' "Adventures with Indians." Since "Adventures with Indians," a collection of short stories about

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Indians, is copyrighted 1908, Harper's must either have bought the story some years before Coomer died, or obtained it from some now unknown source for reprint.

Later we quote from an obituary that says, "He also contributed many short stories for **Harper's Magazine**, **Munseys** and other periodicals." But the few issues, far from complete or even consecutive, of **Harper's Magazine** or **Munseys Magazine** that have been examined have not uncovered anything by Coomer.

While editor (from 1872 to 1878) of the **Warren** (Rhode Island) **Gazette** he wrote editorials that were "picked up" and widely copied by other publications.

Poetry, short and serial-length stories, editorials and hard-backed books have been printed and re-printed, yet there has been no reference to George H. Coomer uncovered in any of the so-called literary encyclopedia or authors' or poets' biographical references.

How many words must an author write before he is entitled to recorded identification? Maybe, as today, it is popularity and not the total number of words published that makes the difference, but these many recorded sales (we must, no doubt, assume he was paid for his contributions) to so many various editors show that there was a very real interest on the part of the reading public in what he had written.

Evidence indicates that George H. Coomer began his writing (at least his published writing as a poet, certainly), somewhat earlier than 1851, as his own book of verse appeared in that year. As a teller of tales we have a short story which appeared in **Ballou's Monthly Magazine** as early as February, 1868. **Ballou's** was clearly a family paper with nine pages devoted to "Our Young People's Story Teller." Coomer's contribution, however, was among the adult stories and not in the "Young People's" section. Numerous short stories and serials for younger readers began appearing in the first years of **Golden Days** (1880) and **Golden Argosy** (1883).

Most of his few juvenile books are apparently a reprinting of his earlier serials. There are one or two curious, questional exceptions which will be considered at the proper time.

George Henry Coomer was the son of Harry and Prudence Ladieu Coomer. He was born on Bristol Neck in the town of Bristol, Rhode Island, on December 13, 1825. Bristol is about five miles south of Warren; thirteen miles east-southeast of Providence, on the shore of Narragansett Bay.

The town of Bristol was settled in 1669, was involved in King Philip's War and was bombarded by British Ships in 1775 and laid waste by the British in 1778. More to our purpose, it was once a center for whale fishing and shipbuilding in our country's early history. This accident of birth in this geographical location was to have a great influence on his future writing.

A curious story, without real "relevance" as we like to say today, was acquired in an unexpected manner. In a conversation with a retired Instructor from Columbia University it was made known that the towns of Warren and Bristol were of particular interest in preparation of this article.

My friend told of seeking for data concerning the DeWolf family. This was the family which included the actor (William) DeWolf Hopper, of whom many of us have heard. The family was supposed to have had roots in Bristol, Rhode Island. When my friend arrived in Bristol in search of local library material, he found that his arrival was a few hours too late. All that was left of the library building and all of its valuable historical records were smoldering ruins of a fire that had destroyed the building but a few hours earlier. It is just as well that I did not at first know of Coomer's birth place to begin checking for definite dates or I might soon have given up my explorations.



The moral of this story is quite evident, if you have information that could be of interest or value at some future date, do not tuck it away in a supposedly safe place—broadcast it.

Before the date of George Coomer's birth was learned, it seemed probable that his first book, a book of verse printed at his own expense, must have been published in middle or later life—it actually was printed when George Coomer was in his **twenty-sixth year**! Before that book was printed his poems were already appearing in the **Boston Cultivator**, a publication first appearing in 1839 and changing its name to the **American Cultivator** sometime before discontinuing publication in 1915. Someone asked if the word "Cultivator" in the title had reference to literary or agricultural cultivation. Having never seen a copy of the magazine or paper, I do not know.

We may guess that the poetry in the **Boston Cultivator** was George Coomer's earliest published writing, which may have well been and quite probably formed the basis of his first book. At least we do have definite evidence of what is fairly certain to have been his first book. "Miscellaneous Poems," by George H. Coomer was printed in "Boston: Published by the Author, 1851." William A. Hall, Printer, had his shop at 22 School Street. It is a slim volume of 81 poems. The foreword may be revealing:

"TO THE READER.

To the readers of this volume, it may not be improper for the author to say, at the outset, that the work before them is not the production of one who enters the field of poesy with the advantages of high literary attainment. He would, therefore, most respectfully solicit the indulgence of the learned and candid, to any inaccuracies which the eye of criticism may discover in his compositions.

"The author would return his grateful acknowledgments to those who have favored him with their subscriptions; and although, in the present, work, they may find far more to censure than to praise, they will permit him to express the ardent hope of his heart, that at some future day he may be able to place before them some production, free from the faults which, he fears, will be found to characterize his first effort, and more worthy the attention of his readers.

G. H. C.

Warren, R. I., March, 1851."

As we shall see, his "poesy" improves with experience, but some of the titles in this first collected effort may suggest the poet's preoccupation with mortality. Death at that period, and well into the twentieth century was the "in thing."

Here are a few of the titles from this book collection: "The Death of a Cat," "To the Departed," "Death of Abner," "O Bury Me," "Sadness," "On the Death of a Horse," "The Poor Man's Grave," "On a Departed Poet" (did he die or just go away?). It might be well to admit here that while I held a copy of "Miscellaneous Poems" in my hands and scanned it rather superficially, I only xeroxed a few pages. Two more "happy" titles that were missed above are: "The Dead," and "Epitaph on a Miser." This sampling from the eighty-one titles all sound melancholy for an "oldster" of twenty-six, but then, probably it was the "times" as suggested earlier.

Critical as we may be, there is real music and imagination apparent in many of the verses read. As an example from "The Death of a Cat," a poem of six stanzas, here are the 3rd, 4th and 6th stanzas:

She saw, what all must see below,  
She played the great world's play.  
Till tired and weary of the show,  
She sighed, and went away!

(Who dares to say that George didn't know his Shakespeare!?)

There, where the bough the sunbeam breaks,  
Shall fall, like fleecy snow,  
The spring-time blossoms' flowery flakes,  
Soft on her grave below!

So shall she lie, while years go by,  
And shifting scenes move on;  
She's seen the show we're seeing now,  
And played her part, and gone!

Nice imagery and nicely symmetrical with six stanzas of four lines each, a point that will be mentioned again within a different context.

From the same collection, here's the last stanza of: "To the Schooner Charles Herbert, Bound to California."

Those days are gone, and vanished long,  
Yet Ocean knows their story;  
And well I love her stately song,  
Her grand and gloomy glory!

As a non-poet, and almost completely ignorant of poetic art, there does appear to be something lacking in the meter of some of the verse quoted—but, never-the-less something rather lovely does get through.

No evidence has been found of George Coomer's poetry having been published in *Golden Days*; but *Golden Argosy* used his verse, short stories and serial-length tales.

A weak link in this record is what has been printed in *The Youth's Companion*. The editor of that publication had a liking for Coomer's poetry and published it quite regularly for a long period. Louise Harris in her two definitive books on the writing of C. A. Stephens to be found in *The Youth's Companion* laments the fact that there appears to be no complete file of that publication extant, which she has unquestionably searched for far and wide. But we do know that this popular weekly began in 1827 and continued until it was merged with *The American Boy* in 1922—some time before George Coomer was ready for publication and long after he was no longer living.

While this writer has never found any stories in those copies of *The Youth's Companion* that he has seen, he has found many poems. The last uncovered to date was in issue #14 of April 7, 1887 when George Coomer was 62 years of age. Probably later verses can be found for he was still publishing in *Golden Days* as late as 1894 when he was 69.

This may be the point at which we need to again make it quite clear that this account is not exhaustive. The poetry mentioned in this first portion, especially, is intentionally far from complete, even when a number in our own collection have been unmentioned for the purpose of conserving space. Although, we quickly add, our opportunity to research completely and correctly has been drastically curtailed because full runs of so many publications have been impossible to locate.

One rather surprising and somewhat amusing result of the poetry research was the finding of a featured eight-stanza poem entitled "The Young Reefer" in #38 of *The Youth's Companion* dated September 23, 1886, credited to George Henry Coomer—apparently after that one-time use of his middle name, he reverted to the customary George H. Coomer. The full name of Coomer in this issue of *The Youth's Companion* was especially surprising because of that magazine's rather peculiar, and certainly customary, policy of crediting writers meagerly, occasionally, or not at all. In #38 of September 23, 1886, they credited George Henry Coomer as explained above; in most instances it was George H. Coomer, but in #37 of September 16, 1886 (just



the weekly issue ahead of the George Henry Coomer credit!) it was "G.H.C." (The often puzzling editorial practices of *The Youth's Companion* should make an interesting account in itself—especially as it concerns credits or non-credits for its contributors.)

Chronologically, the first poem to appear in *Golden Argosy* was in #15 of Vol. I, dated March 17, 1883. It happens to be one of my favorites, and since it also seems to show considerable improvement over the earlier effort of 1851, here it is quoted in all of its six stanzas:

#### THE VACANT SCHOOL-LOT.

A moment by the once familiar spot,  
I trace the landmarks of the vacant lot;  
Then see the master with his book and rule,  
Or hear his bell that gathered in the school.  
Ah, can it be the mosses so have crept  
O'er the white headstone where he long has slept?

I mind how, smiling at our forts of snow,  
That pictured war without its guilt or woe,  
He oft would name us Caesars, Bonapartes,  
Yet happier than such in guileless hearts.  
And when had come the softened days of spring,  
His kind heart glowed to hear our shouts outring;  
While life and joy inspired each cheery call,  
As gleamed the bat and sped the flying ball.

Among the dear old trees so shattered soon,  
The robins came when early leaves were green,  
And reared their chirping nestlings, not more free  
In the blue air than on the sod were we.

Each rock and shrub we knew, each corner nook,  
Each whirl and shallow of the coursing brook,  
That so in April swept with broadened line,  
O'er bank and meadow like a mimic Rhine:  
And so in August was devoured and drained,  
That but our footprints in its bed remained.

Oh, many a scene that shall be sweet in age,  
Unconsciously we trace on childhood's page;  
And mellow, lovelier, dearer to the last,  
Gleams the bright country that we call the past.

I muse of those so glad, so hopeful then,  
Grown old along the changeful paths of men,  
Or laid in sleep beneath some churchyard tree—  
And yet they all have life and youth for me.

Here again, without knowing the poet's age, judging only by the verse, its subject and expression, I would take it as being from an older man—but George Coomer was only 58 when he wrote these lines.

As to the poem itself, and again speaking as definitely not an expert on poetry, I have never before heard of a poetic form that permits such variation in lengths of stanzas: this has 6 lines in the first, 8 lines in the second, 4 lines in the third, 6 lines in the fourth and 4 lines each in the fifth and the sixth. If Coomer wrote it so, it seems strange that the editor let it pass. (Unless, like myself, he too was no poet!)

But to its credit, isn't it a delight to read!

Ah, can it be the mosses so have crept

O'er the white headstone where he long has slept?

Or, again: the whole of the 3rd, 5th and 6th stanzas!

In #19 of *Golden Argosy* of the same year, 1883, he had a poem of four stanzas entitled "The Present Hour" published. Three years later, he tried his hand at a "sales pitch" for *Argosy* (Vol. V, #1 of December 4th) with five stanzas of a jingle he called "The Crew of the Argosy."

Much of his better verse is to be found in the pages of *The Youth's Companion*, maybe because he was writing better, or perhaps because their editor was just a little harder to please.

"The Young Reefer," mentioned earlier was a rhymed tale of the young lad who had signed up to sail away, fell from the yardarm or whatever, and was buried at sea. (Back to the old sob stories!) There does not seem to be too much of this "story telling" in verse such as "The Vacant School-Lot" and "The Young Reefer," probably because he was finding his talent for writing straight acceptable (saleable) prose.

For the record, the pages of *The Youth's Companion* were perused from August, 1885, through to the end of 1887, when April of that year seems to be G.H.C.'s final appearance for 1887—accounting for 13 poems in this short period.

A sweet sad philosophical sentiment complete in these short eight lines of "O Little One," seems particularly interesting for its emotional power achieved without excessive wordage:

Why hold I thus thy dear life incomplete?

Why dream of some maturer bloom denied?

O little one, thy soft unsullied feet

The dim seen hills for me have beautified,

And death that cometh unto things so sweet,

No more is dreadful; there is nothing dead.

O little one, we two again shall meet;

Where thou has trodden, can I fear to tread?

It is promised here that the reader will be kept guessing as to the date of George H. Coomer's death until the third and last installment. (The writer sought for that information for five or six years before he finally found the answer!) However, it can be admitted now that he was 60 years of age in 1885 when the above eight lines were written. Whether he ever married, or if he had any children of his own, has never been learned, but surely a father, no matter how talented as a poet, could have better or more beautifully expressed the loss of a child.

Here is the known three year record for verse in *The Youth's Companion*:

1885— #6—2/5 "The Birds at St. Valentine's."

#32—8/6 "O Little One."

#33—8/13 "Self-Respect."

#34—8/20 "Provision."

#42—10/15 "Old—Not Venerable."

#43—10/22 "Golden-Rod."

#44—copy missing and not examined.

#45—11/15 "The Pasture Rills."

1886— #12—3/25 "The Field of Boaz."

#29—7/22 "Mid-Summer."

#37—9/16 "Conscience."

#38—9/23 "The Young Reefer."

#46—11/18 "Grief."

1887— #14—4/7 "Spring Memories."



(No further verse for 1887 after #14.)

Can the almost continuous run in 1885 from #32 through #45 suggest the printing or re-printing of an already accumulated collection?

Having commented that poetry is not the usual subject for DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP, we seem to have covered George H. Coomer's accomplishments as a poet fairly thoroughly in this segment of our documentation.

Let us close with one final example, used in an obituary published by the *Warren Gazette* as "most appropriate for publication at" that time—but without their recording the source or date of the original:

### THE STOPPING OF THE CLOCK.

Surprising falls the instantaneous calm

The sudden silence in my chamber small;

I, starting, lift my head in half alarm—

The clock has stopped—that's all.

The clock has stopped! Yet why have I so found

An instant feeling almost like dismay?

Why note its silence sooner than its sound?

For it has ticked all day.

So may a life beside my own go on,

And such companionship unheeded keep,

Companionship scarce recognized till gone,

and lost in sudden sleep.

And so the blessings heaven daily grants

Are in their very commonness forgot;

We little heed what answereth our wants—

Until it answers not.

A strangeness falleth on familiar ways.

As if some pulse were gone beyond recall.

Something unthought of, linked with all our days!

Some clock has stopped—that's all.

A word of caution: In most of the publications studied, carrying verse by George H. Coomer, poems were seen quite regularly and much more often than verse by Coomer credited to George Cooper. It is natural to wonder if Coomer and Cooper may be the same person. They are not. Coomer was born in Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1825; George Cooper was born in New York City on May 14, 1840. The difference in their ages means that George H. Coomer's 1851 book of poems would have been published when Cooper was only 15 years of age. Also, verse by George Cooper was still appearing rather regularly when search for George Coomer was beginning to uncover either reprints or blanks. This indicates that the two rather similar names should not be confused.

### End of Part I.

Part II will discuss George H. Coomer as a writer of short stories.

Part III, and the final installment, will recount his work as a writer of serial-length stories and his few books.

### A Few Suggestions For Further Research

Publications that need much more careful checking: *Munsey's Magazine* (a number checked show nothing by G.H.C.); a much greater number of *The Youth's Companion*, even though it may not exist in a complete file, there are



many numbers still in existence to be studied, especially as to whether they published anything of his other than poems. More copies of Ballou's *Monthly Magazine* might be sought out, the writer of this survey only owns four issues, with only one Coomer story, but Ralph P. Smith has found 24 issues with Coomer material (to be covered in detail before completion of these three installments and crediting Ralph P. Smith's contribution to the record).

Are there any existing copies of the *Boston Cultivator*?

The obituary we have been using (and the only one known to this writer) states: "He also contributed many short stories for *Harper's Magazine*, *Munsey's* and other publications." No copies of *Harper's* has as yet been checked by the writer. Munsey, of course, published *Golden Argosy* (later just plain *Argosy*). But as mentioned in the body of this first installment, the copies of *Munsey's Magazine* checked, disclosed nothing by G.H.C.

How much of George H. Coomer was reprinted? When? Where?

In what unnamed publications has he been published?

What did the *Warren Gazette* print of his in addition to the editorials while, before and after he was editor of that publication, 1872 to 1878?

Has everything published been over George H. Coomer's own name, or did he at some time, in some instances, use a pen name?

These questions are suggestive, not conclusive. Another year or two of hard work might and may dig out some of the answers.

### A DIME NOVEL COLLECTOR'S BOOK SHELF

A ROUND TRIP TO THE YEAR 2000 by William Wallace Cook. Hyperion Press, Inc., 45 Riverside Ave., Westport, Conn. 06880. A reprint of Cook's science fiction novel first published in *Argosy Magazine* in 1903 and reprinted in the New Fiction Library and again in the Adventure Library by Street & Smith. In the introduction by Sam Moskowitz it is pointed out that the book is important since it was the first to envision robots, though Cook used the word "muglug" in writing about them. Mr. Moskowitz, who is a tireless researcher in the science fiction field, missed the New Fiction Library edition in writing his introduction. Price for the paper back edition is \$3.85.

THE IMMORTAL STORM. A History of Science Fiction Fandom, by Sam Moskowitz. Hyperion, Inc., 45 Riverside Ave., Westport, Conn. 06880.

\$3.50. A lively history of the early days of science fiction fandom—the battles, brawls and break-ups, divisions, disasters and accomplishments of a highly talented and individualistic group of science-fiction enthusiasts—many of whom have become today's great names in the field.

### NEWS NOTE

Mr. Philip G. Atkins of 713 Carswell Terrace, Arlington, Texas 76010 has published "Seeking His Fortune" by Horatio Alger. Paper bound, it makes a great addition to one's Alger collection. Price is \$2.25.

### WANTED

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180 Varick, New York, N. Y. 10014

### WANTED

JIM-TWIN ALLEN STORIES,

Published in a Western pulp magazine 1927-1935.

Author believed to be Hal Dunning.

W. A. Seaman, 6 Hawthorn Crescent, Bramalea Woods, Ont., L6S 1B1, Canada

## The Real Robin Hood

By W. O. G. Lofts

"... and this," said the guide, pointing to the hollow of a gigantic, centuries-old oak tree, "is where Robin Hood used to hide from the Sheriff of Nottingham."

The small group of tourists moved forward a little closer, curiously. I was then a small boy amongst them. Like generations of other boys, I had always been thrilled by the exploits of the Outlaw of Sherwood Forest, though my own particular hero was Dick Turpin, the dashing Highwayman. My only other memory of this boyhood visit was of my younger brother—an avid Robin Hood enthusiast, and having his own band of outlaws complete with bows and arrows—being considered far too young to make the journey from London. Certainly his followers would have been sadly disillusioned about their leader if they could have seen the tears he shed at his great disappointment in not seeing the locality where Robin Hood used to roam.

Whether Robin Hood ever actually used that particular oak tree in which to hide from the Sheriff would be almost impossible to prove or disprove today—as difficult as it would be to satisfy all the historians and writers that without doubt Robin Hood DID exist in those days.

Robin Hood!—easily the most famous and popular figure in all English history. This medieval outlaw, living in Sherwood (or Barnsdale) Forest, with his large band of followers, including such well-known names as Friar Tuck, Little John, Will Scarlet and Alan O'Dale; not forgetting Robin's own true love, the sweet Maid Marian.

Robin Hood engaged all who crossed his path, from king to beggar, within or without the forest. His most outstanding characteristic was that he was a benefactor of the poor and oppressed at the main expense of the privileged. He was a born leader of men, a merry daredevil; brave, chivalrous, exceedingly kind to persons less gifted than himself—and especially to fair damsels in distress. He was loyal to the King, but certainly not to the hunting laws, nor especially to the King's agent, the well-known Sheriff of Nottingham. He was also a sportsman of extraordinary ability, excelling in wrestling and fighting, with either sword or quarterstaff. Above all, he was the greatest archer of all time. Although usually the victor in his encounters with his enemies, he could be a very generous loser. In short, he was the ordinary man's ideal.

A short while ago I paid a return visit to Nottingham and to what is now locally termed "The Robin Hood Country." One of the most notable additions since my last boyhood visit was a statue of Robin Hood erected just below Nottingham Castle. It depicts Robin with his longbow fully drawn, directing an arrow towards the castle. Attached to the castle walls are also plaques showing incidents from his life, which must have made Robin's sworn enemy—the Sheriff of Nottingham—turn over in his grave.

Nottingham Castle, which stands on sandstone hills, and is honeycombed with caves, was burned down by Luddites at the turn of the last century in protest against the new machines in the textile trade, which were putting them out of work. Consequently most of it has been rebuilt since Robin Hood's day. Most of the stonework, however, is still intact and—looking up the steep sides to the castle towering into the sky—I marvelled how those men of the outlaw's band could possibly have penetrated such a fortress. Later, inside the castle, I wished I could have been transported back 700 years in an H. G. Wells' time machine, to have learned the whole true story of Robin Hood.



I could picture, in my mind's eye, the large banqueting hall, filled with richly clothed and bejewelled merchants and nobles, the tables groaning with roast venison, barons of beef, boars' heads and other delicacies; rich red wine, swilled noisily from gold and silver goblets. At his rightful place at the head of the table would be the powerful, pompous Sheriff of Nottingham. Suddenly there would be a flash of green at the windows and a tall, handsome man, clothed in Lincoln green and wearing a forester's cap stuck with a jaunty feather, would leap on to one of the tables. He would have a hunting-horn in one hand and a six-foot bow in the other.

"Robin Hood!" the dismayed company would gasp. And Robin, with a gay, infectious laugh, would exclaim:

"Pray, don't be alarmed, my noble lords. I only come to relieve you of your valuables."

Cursing and lamenting their misfortune they would have no option but to obey orders, with Robin's men standing behind him ready to fire their arrows at the slightest sign of resistance. Robin would give the Sheriff a last mocking bow, then he and his outlaws would depart as swiftly as they had come, leaving the Sheriff and his guests fuming with useless fury.

That would be Robin Hood, as we all probably know and picture him. But how much of this is historically true? There are certainly more mysteries surrounding Robin Hood than any thriller writer could possibly put into a novel; and probably more controversy than in who really wrote the William Shakespeare plays. Unlike Robin Hood, however, Shakespeare did at least leave his written works to posterity.

Many learned historians are of the belief that "Robin Hood" was originally a mythical forest elf of English folklore, who was used a great deal by ballad writers from the 12th to the 15th century. The name is also supposed to have been given to any robber leader who made his home in the forests or on the moors, who excelled in archery and who defied the oppressive forest laws—thus attracting popular sympathy. Another suggestion is that "Robin Hood" originated from the old Scandinavian mythology of our ancestors. About the 12th century, Woden was given the name of "Robin" and the tales of his outlawry may have been a later form of the legend of the Wild Huntsman which was associated with Woden. But the most popular theory, and one which I believe to be the most likely (according to my own researches and investigation into the subject) is that Robin Hood was a real person, rightfully claiming to be the true Earl of Huntingdon; his real name being Robert Fitzooth.

History is known only through manuscripts, documents, books and monuments, either left or handed down by our ancestors, and it is really difficult to understand why Robin Hood, mentioned so many times alongside genuinely unquestioned historical figures, is still considered by some historians to be either a myth or a legend. A classic example of this is the first mention of Robin Hood in history by William Langland during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377). His book, "The Vision of Piers Plowman," which certainly has some authentic history in its pages, contains a couplet uttered by a drunken priest:

"I Kan not perfitly my Patrnoſter as the preſt it ſayeth,  
But I Kan rymes of Robyn Hode and Randulf, Earl of Cheſter."

This means that the fame of Robin Hood must have been fairly well established by the middle of the 14th century. Randulf, the 3rd Earl of Chester, who lived in the reigns of Richard I, John and Henry III, was certainly a genuine figure in history, and by an amazing coincidence he was—like Robin Hood—connected with Nottingham Castle, besieging it in 1194 on behalf of King Richard I.

When John, surnamed Scot, Earl of Huntingdon, died in 1237 with no issue it seemed that the title would become extinct. But Robert, son of William Fitzooth (who had been brought up as ward to Robert, Earl of Oxford—another branch of the family) being the only male left, was rightly the new Earl of Huntingdon. Many old manuscripts in the Sloane Library in the British Museum say that Robert Fitzooth was of noble extraction, and I see no reason to doubt the authenticity of the statement. Certainly I understand that the present noble family of Huntingdon have not denied the truth of this association; and their connection with English history goes right back to their family name of Hastings in the days of William the Conqueror (1066). Indeed one of the sons of the 14th Earl of Huntingdon had the name of Robin Hood included in his Christian names, and he in turn included the name Robin Hood in the names he gave to all his sons.

All the same, it is somewhat difficult to connect the present Earl of Huntingdon with our hero, as on Robin's death—he being childless—the title became extinct. This title seems to have been revived by King Henry VIII on the 8th December 1529, when the first new earl was installed.

Robert Fitzooth was born in the town of Locksley, Nottingham, about 1160; and here we have the first mystery, as a search through old records of town and village names brings no mention of this place. It is possible that the name may have been misspelt—and could refer to Loxley, just outside Sheffield and no great distance away. In any case, the names of towns and villages of which no trace is now to be found except in ancient writings and which have been accepted by historical authorities would fill a large volume.

William, his father, a Norman nobleman went to the Crusades and the infant, Robert, was left in the care of an uncle. It is still completely obscure as to what happened to his mother. When William Fitzooth died fighting, the uncle wished to become the new Earl of Huntingdon, desiring the tremendous power which went with it, but he found his baby nephew an obstacle to his plans. Not having the courage to kill the infant, he put him into the care of a childless couple named Gilbert Hood and his wife, who lived at Mansfield Woodhouse in Sherwood Forest. Thus Robert Fitzooth was brought up as their own child; the name Robert was shortened to Robin and he naturally adopted their own surname of Hood.

It has been suggested by some historians that the "Fitz" being omitted, this leaves "ooth" and by converting the "th" into "d" it becomes "ood." But I can personally see no reason for this corruption in such a short period of time. One can change any word to suit the purpose needed by three alterations! Hood (or Hode) was also a very common name at that period. Another popular theory is that in those days of medieval costume, hoods were a popular mode of dress and Robin Hood was merely Robin with the Hood! Likewise, Robin of the Wood became (corrupted) Robin Hood.

Gilbert Hood was a forester who kept deer for King Richard I, whilst Robin's foster mother was niece to Sir Guy of Warwick as well as being sister to Squire Gamewell of Great Gamewell Hall. One can see, therefore, that young Robin was brought up by fairly well-to-do middle-class parents. Contrary to his gentlemanly behaviour in later life, he had a somewhat wild and extravagant disposition and was always getting into trouble and various scrapes because of his boastful ways. As a forester's son he became an expert at woodcraft, learning the habits of deer and other woodland animals; and was an extremely clever performer in the strenuous sports of his day. Above all he was a brilliant archer.

Now most of the following accounts of Robin Hood's deeds and life-style are admittedly taken from ballads, the most famous being "A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode" printed by Wynkyn de Worde about 1490 and written, it is he-



lieved, not long after Robin's death. Most certainly some of these accounts may have been distorted slightly, but there is no reason why—in the main—they should not be accepted as fact. John Selden, a jurist and Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London, was reported to have said: "There is more historic truth in many of our old ballads than in many modern histories."—and other evidence could, indeed, be brought forth to prove the truth of this theory.

But to return to Robin Hood. As a youth, at around fifteen years of age, he made a journey into Nottingham, hearing that the King had arranged a shooting match in the town. On the way he happened to meet a band of fifteen foresters, also on their way to Nottingham, and somewhat the worse for drink. Boasting that he could beat them at archery, Robin wagered twenty crown that he could shoot an arrow into a selected mark better than any one of the foresters could. Seeing such a slight young challenger, and with thoughts of easy money in their minds, they readily agreed.

Robin Hood beat them easily and claimed his rightful prize. He was, however, rudely told to begone, or they would break his bones. Full of rage and mortification at being thus cheated, Robin promised them that they should soon learn the "real prowess of his bow." The foresters still laughed at him and continued on their way towards Nottingham; Robin followed them and killed them all, one by one, with his arrows.

At first mention this would seem too fantastic a happening to be true—a mere boy archer to kill fifteen men! But is it? During a never-to-be-forgotten experience in the Burmese jungle during the last war, one Japanese sniper killed nine of my patrol of sixteen before being discovered, the shots seemingly coming from nowhere. In the circumstances, therefore, it seems quite logical to me that an expert archer, hiding in thick foliage, could kill fifteen men—especially as they were all somewhat befuddled by drink!

When the foresters failed to arrive in Nottingham, where they were expected, the townsfolk became alarmed and organized a search. They found the bodies and carried them into Nottingham, where they were buried side by side in the local churchyard.

In 1796 there was a minor sensation when some laborers, digging in a garden in Fox Lane, Nottingham, found human skeletons laid neatly side by side, in almost the exact spot where the foresters were supposedly buried. Some reports say there were six bodies in a row, others say thirteen; another report adds that a cross-bolt was found in one of the skulls. Whether these bodies were part of Robin Hood's mass revenge killing I cannot confirm or deny, but the coincidence is surely remarkable?

With the hue and cry after him, Robin Hood fled into the depths of Sherwood Forest—to become its most famous outlaw.

In King Richard's time, England was covered by dense tracts of forest and it was said that a squirrel could have hopped from tree to tree almost across the entire country. Robin Hood, who had fled into Sherwood Forest at the age of 15, found no difficulty in hiding from the Sheriff's men, who had orders to kill him on sight for the mass shooting of fifteen foresters.

Because of its abundance of deer Sherwood Forest had been proclaimed a Royal forest. The Kings of England had taken a great delight in hunting and all the deer—red, roe, and fallow—were closely preserved for the Royal sport. To enlarge and preserve the forest home of the deer family, cottages, small farms and other dwellings were often ruthlessly burned down and their unfortunate owners turned out into the world penniless. Often the men-folk, were forced, by dire circumstances, to become outlaws.

In medieval times killing the kings' deer was a serious crime and any offender unfortunate enough to be caught had his forefinger and thumb of



his right hand cut off, so that he could no longer draw a bow. If he was caught a second time the culprit was blinded by having a blazing torch thrust into his eyes. In the (most unlikely) event of being caught a third time the pitiful wretch was hanged in the local market-place as a warning to others.

These harsh laws were enforced by harsh men, commonly called verderers, who not only had to gain and keep the King's favor, but quite often enriched their own pockets by tyrannizing the local villagers and farmers.

Sherwood Forest hid several hundred of these fugitives from justice, most of them good and honest men whose only crime was to rebel against the verders holding the laws of authority—this authority being vested solely in the guarding of the King's deer.

Robin Hood's early days are somewhat obscure, and we next hear of him as a man in the prime of life—"broad of shoulder, deep of chest, and with arms of solid brawn and sinew." According to some reports he had a short curly beard and moustache of deep auburn. He had obviously grown out of his boastful and extravagant habits and had become a brave and tactful leader of a group of these fugitives from justice.

To recruit new men for his band of outlaws Robin used to disguise himself as a beggar in rags and personally test in combat each new recruit before he was allowed to join his band of "Merry Men."

The first of the most famous of the outlaws who joined was Little John—a giant of a man reported to be nearly seven feet tall. His real name was Naylor, or Nailor—after his trade—and people of that surname for centuries afterwards would claim him as an ancestor. His original longbow, over six feet tall, is still in the possession of a private collector, and it is reported to have the name of Naylor on it.

Friar Tuck was reputed to have been one of the monks at Fountainsdale Abbey, which was of the Cistercian order; he could also have originated possibly from one of the Dominican Friars who first became prominent in this country in the year 1221. They represented at that time a much lower religious order, and they were certainly the most numerous—many of them being far from holy . . .

Will Scarlet was another member of the famous band who first engaged in personal combat with Robin Hood. His real name was Will Gamewell, and he was the son of Squire Gamewell of Gamewell Hall, being also Robin's cousin. When he first met Robin he was wearing bright red raiment, and the name stuck, so that he was known from then on as Will "Scarlet."

Allan-o'-Dale—unlike the other members of the famous trio—was originally a penniless harper, and he first met Robin Hood when he was in great distress because his lady-love was about to be wed without her consent to an old knight—brother of the Bishop of Peterborough, who was conducting the ceremony. Needless to say, Robin soon put this right; Allan-o'-Dale was married by Friar Tuck at Popplewick Church to his true love, and he carried her off to live with him in his bower (rough dwelling) in Sherwood Forest.

Probably the last famous person to join the merry band of outlaws was Robin's own true love, the "sweet Maid Marian"—and she is, undoubtedly, the most mysterious personage of them all! She is not mentioned in any of the early ballads, and the earliest record of Maid Marian does not appear until the 15th century, when she appeared in connection with the old English Morris Dances. (It was customary then for her part to be played by a man dressed as a woman, who attended the Morris dancers.)

Popular theory, however, and which I personally believe to be the most likely, is that Maid Marian was really Matilda, the daughter of the Baron of Arlingford (Lord Robert Fitzwater) and was of noble blood. Certainly these were real persons in history; and plays featuring both Matilda and Robin



Hood were produced as far back as 1592 and were reputed to be based on real-life events.

Matilda and Robin were acquainted from childhood days and were indeed sweethearts. When Robin was forced to flee into Sherwood Forest, Matilda—who lived at Arlingford Castle, still remembered him. She grew into a beautiful woman, much admired and courted by many suitors—including Robin's arch enemy, King John. But she tired of their attentions and did not love or care for any of them. Eventually she set out to find her own true love, Robin Hood, in Sherwood Forest.

It is reputed that, disguised as a page boy, she met Robin on his way to Nottingham, also disguised—as a beggar. Not recognizing each other, they started to fight. However, the young lovers discovered their mistake before any real harm had been done and were lovingly reunited.

As related, Robin Hood's band of outlaws were in the main good and honest men, driven to outlawry by injustice and misfortune. Their strictest vow, like that of the foresters, was the vow of celibacy, this to hold good until they were no longer outlawed.

Probably this is the reason why Robin and Matilda never married, despite reports that they WERE married at Edwinstowe Parish Church. Although this church still exists, no records are available to prove this supposed marriage.

As she no longer wished to be called Lady Matilda, Friar Tuck baptized the girl "Sweet Maid Marian"—"sweet" because of her wonderfully kind and gentle disposition, and "maid" because of "the spotless maiden life that she shall keep until Robin's life be ended." (In view of the fact that she was undoubtedly Robin's mistress, this last would seem to be somewhat ambiguous.) The name Marian was merely a derivative of "Matilda."

(To be continued)

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